

The Modern and the Traditional in Early Shōwa Culture and Popular Music

昭和初期の文化とポピュラー音楽における「近代化」と「伝統」

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概 要

近代化が進んでいる昭和初期の日本の文化や日常生活では、西洋の影響を受けた「モダン・ライフ」と日本の「伝統」が様々な形で共存していた。この論文では昭和初期の文化を背景にして、服部良一の作品、そしていわゆる「藝芸者」のレコードなどの歌謡曲を取り上げ、「近代」と「伝統」を象徴するものとして分析する。

I. Introduction

The period between the First and Second World Wars was a time of profound change in Japanese society and culture, and especially in the fabric of daily life in the cities. Emerging together with new styles, patterns, and technologies of living were new ways of thinking about or imagining urban life. In particular, an idea of the "modern" was taking shape, together with an opposing idea of Japanese "tradition." This opposition had its roots in the related one of "Japanese" and "Western" that had been formed during the Meiji period; but it was during the 1910s and 1920s that the availability of Western products and changes in the media, transportation, entertainment, clothing, food, and the organization of consumption had transformed urban life sufficiently to constitute in many people's minds a new and distinct "modern life" (for which the terms *kindai seikatsu* and *modan raifu*, significantly, were both commonly used). This modern life tended to be associated with Westernization, and with the city, as opposed to the traditional Japan that was believed to reside primarily in the rural areas. But both ideas became explicit only with the advent of modern urban life and culture. In a sense "tradition" or *dentō* was created by modernization; no one thought of it as traditional until there was an idea of modern life against which to contrast it. In this paper I will explore these two concepts—the modern and the traditional—as they were manifested in certain areas of daily life, public discourse, and popular song of the inter-war period.

This was a period of great stress in Japanese urban life, and along with stress came the desire for escape: escape from the pressures, uncertainties, tensions and contradictions that had become part of daily living. Modern life had created new forms of stress (which had no

doubt replaced other, pre-modern ones), but also provided a wide variety of means for escape from stress, including romanticized ideas of modernity and tradition. Means of escape were provided especially by new entertainment technologies, one of which was the steadily advancing technology of sound recording and reproduction. Phonograph records were both a component of modern life and a medium through which conceptions of the modern and the traditional were formed and propagated. After considering the overall picture of Japanese inter-war popular culture and discourse in terms of the modern-traditional dichotomy, I will discuss a selection of popular songs that express or manifest certain aspects of this dichotomy.

II . Modern Life: Its Pleasures and Discontents

The Great Kantô Earthquake of September 1, 1923 gave a great impetus to both the urban modernization and the urban anxiety of subsequent years. Much of Tokyo (especially the Low City or *shitamachi*) was destroyed in the earthquake and the fires that followed, and vast numbers of people were killed or injured. A royal declaration shortly thereafter noted that Tokyo was seen as "the fountainhead of the cultural advancement of the nation" and that it would be not only rebuilt but also transformed "in ample provisions for the future development of the city."¹ Ambitious plans were drawn up for this transformation, which were later scaled back for financial reasons; nevertheless the rebuilt city ended up with many new and wider streets, and a number of new parks. But much of what remained of old Edo had disappeared. The nostalgic trend of the 1920s and 1930s is due in part to the sense of loss that followed this disappearance. Meanwhile, the sheer trauma of the catastrophe certainly left a psychological residue of unease and uncertainty, which was heightened a few years later by the financial panic of 1927, in which a number of major banks collapsed. The memory and the fear of disaster, natural or man-made, was an undercurrent of Japan's modernization.

The emergence of "modern life" was perhaps most obvious in the transformation of the urban environment, especially that of Tokyo as it was reconstructed after the earthquake. New transportation technology moved people around the city more rapidly, and more noisily, than had ever been possible before. Electric streetcars had been in use since the late Meiji period, but now high-speed commuter rail lines appeared, introducing the phenomenon of "rush hour" and creating a sense of dynamic hustle.² In 1927 Japan's first subway line was opened, connecting Tokyo Station, Ueno and Asakusa. In 1928 the speed of commuter trains was increased, and the time allowed for station stops was cut down to 30 seconds.³ Auto-

¹ Seidensticker, pp.7-8.

² Smith, p.68.

³ Shimokawa, pp.13, 17.

mobiles were multiplying rapidly on the city streets, from 4,000 in 1921 to over 13,000 in 1927, and their associated dangers multiplied accordingly: automobile accidents had increased to over 600 per month by 1926, and in the same year Japan's first violent auto theft was recorded. Horse-drawn wagons were decreasing in number, despite government recommendations that people consider their advantages for transporting freight over short distances.⁴ New transportation technology, in short, increased the pace and no doubt the excitement of city life, but also, it seems, the stress and the danger (although these may well have been preceded by other stresses and dangers associated, for example, with horses).

Also changing rapidly were people's ways of buying and selling, and the kinds of products they bought and used in their daily lives. By the 1920s consumer goods were being mass-produced for the growing urban populations. These goods were now available not only in traditional shops but also in department stores, which introduced new modes of shopping: prices were fixed, eliminating the social interaction of haggling, and methods of display were designed to prompt the now more passive consumer into buying something.⁵ After the earthquake, department stores took the historical step of allowing customers to enter with their shoes on, and smaller shops soon followed suit.⁶ Cafés appeared, serving exotic drinks such as beer and coffee. Strolling on the Ginza from café to café and store to store – *ginbura* – became the quintessentially modern leisure activity, associated especially with *moga* and *mobo*: “modern girls” and “modern boys.”

Among the many new types of consumer goods, Western clothing was among the most immediately noticeable and most often discussed. The Mitsukoshi department store brought over a fashion designer from France in 1926, and held Japan's first fashion show in 1927 (as a result of which the term “fashion show” entered the Japanese language). The Western clothing of mogas drew a great deal of comment and controversy. But on the whole it was overwhelmingly men rather than women who were adopting Western clothing: among women, including those browsing the modern shops in Ginza and elsewhere, traditional Japanese kimono remained far more popular. In December 1926, researchers for Shiseido observed people walking on Ginza from 1:30 to 2:30 in the afternoon. They counted 797 men in Western clothes and 349 in Japanese clothes; by contrast, there were only 22 women in Western clothes versus 494 in Japanese.⁷ The mogas who enthusiastically adopted Western clothing (partly as a rebellion against tradition and an assertion of modern freedom) were clearly a small, although growing, minority of women, and they were roundly criticized in some quarters (see below). Most women continued to feel more at ease in Japanese clo-

⁴ Ibid., pp.5,7,15.

⁵ Silverberg 1986, p.34.

⁶ Seidensticker, p.30.

⁷ Shimokawa, pp.8,12.

thing, feeling that Western clothing was too bold, or perhaps fearing the negative reactions that such bold clothing could bring. The uneasiness and conflicting feelings of women about Western clothing is suggested by an incident in 1927. A Western-style dressmaking school for girls had opened the previous year, and had 20 students. But the head of the school was the only one who wore Western clothes at work; all the students showed up for work in kimono and geta. The school then began requiring students to wear Western clothes. The students complied, but said they were embarrassed to be seen on the street in Western clothing, and some of them began commuting by taxi.⁸

Makers and retailers of consumer goods were very concerned about such feelings among consumers. Just as interesting as the result of the Shiseido study is the fact that it was done in the first place: where consumers stood on the dichotomy between "Japanese" and "Western" fashions was clearly a matter of great importance to the company. Many large consumer businesses seem to have been hoping to reap large profits by marketing "modernity"—through new, modern, Western goods—but they could not entirely control consumers' tastes, and covered their bets by continuing to market traditional goods as well. Department stores and clothing makers continued to make and sell kimono, and even began to apply Western ideas to the making and wearing of Japanese clothing. Ready-made Japanese clothes were sold for the first time in 1927, department store executives having gotten the idea on a visit to Europe. In 1928, an advertisement for brassieres emphasized that they could be worn under either Japanese or Western clothing.⁹ Westernization, then, was proceeding "under the surface," so to speak, even as the contrast between Japanese and Western fashions was growing more noticeable and controversial.

At the same time, mass media were more and more pervasive: newspapers and magazines multiplied, while radio made its appearance in 1925 and grew rapidly. New popular entertainments were growing as well, including records, comic books, and movies, the last of which was especially powerful in bringing in images from the West and inspiring Western fashions and hairstyles among the young, as well as Western views of relations between the sexes.

The new media also provided a forum (as well as a topic) for the increasingly heated debate about the virtues and/or evils of Westernization and "modern life" itself. A substantial group of Japanese viewed modern life as moral decadence and luxury, in contrast to the virtue and hard work that expressed the "true" Japanese character. This conservative view was in some ways a continuation of Confucian thinking, in which the city had at times been seen as a site of moral corruption.¹⁰ The Japanese government in the 1920s was a leading prop-

⁸ Shimokawa, p.14.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 10, 16.

¹⁰ Smith, p.65.

onent of the need to protect the Japanese character from such corruption. The bureaucracy had a mandate to protect “manners and morals,” and sought to carry out this injunction in a variety of ways. The Home and Education ministries led campaigns to instill moral values through lectures, movies, and *yose* (traditional theater). Movies were censored extensively, mostly for sexual explicitness (kissing was not allowed), but scenes thought to encourage laziness were also cut. Along the same lines, regulations placed on radio restricted music and other entertainment programming, which were required to receive less emphasis than news, weather, and other practical matters. Officials explained these restrictions in terms of an idealized Japanese character and lifestyle: Japanese were hard working and not wealthy enough for a life of leisure, and hence should not be distracted from their work by entertainment shows.¹¹ Thus in the government’s actions and statements traditional Japanese hard work was contrasted with the life of leisure (and loose sexuality) that prevailed in other countries, and that was threatening Japan through modern media such as film and radio. These media had to be controlled as a defense.

Not only the government, but also many ordinary people in the cities followed this line of thinking. Neighborhood organizations or *chōnaikai* had been flourishing since the turn of the century and grew still more numerous after the earthquake; their charters usually expressed a desire to maintain a “healthy nation” and “the true character of the Japanese people” through community cooperation.¹² Implicit in these statements, as in the government’s efforts to safeguard “manners and morals,” was the idea that the true character of the Japanese people was threatened by modern life and was in need of defense. More explicit indictments of modern changes were expressed by intellectuals such as Ōya Sōichi, who lamented the lack of content and history, and the lack of morals, in modern life.¹³

Many other intellectuals of the time, however, were strongly influenced by Marxism, a philosophy that had arrived from the West and that was roundly condemned by the government as a threat to “public safety.” Ironically, while Marxism itself was a part of the modernity that was being condemned by traditionalists, the views expressed by many Marxists coincided with the traditionalist view in condemning modern life as escapist, superficial, and amoral. One of the most influential Marxist writers, Kawakami Hajime, for example, echoed “traditional” Japanese morality in advocating the liberation of people from their selfish desires.¹⁴ The difference, of course, was that Marxists did not base their critique of modern life on an opposition with virtuous tradition, but on a critique of modern capitalism. Gonda Yasunosuke criticized the manipulation of the public through consumer products, and other

¹¹ Kasza, pp.69-76.

¹² Smith, p.66; Bestor pp.68-71.

¹³ Silverberg 1992, p.32.

¹⁴ Bernstein, p.92.

Marxists saw the escapism of modern life as a response to the economic hardships imposed by the capitalist system.¹⁵ Marxist critiques of modernity opposed it to the socialist virtues of the anticipated future rather than the traditional virtues of the past.

Gonda, however, also saw positive value in modern recreation forms: sports, movies, and dancing, he believed, were drawing people together from all classes, and thus helping to create a society that would transcend class differences. Other intellectuals also took a more positive view of modern life. The urban ethnographer Kon Wajiro's painstaking cataloging of the paraphernalia of modern life, for example, implied an acceptance of modernity and an effort to understand the creative processes through which people were constructing modern lives.¹⁶

The popular culture of the period drew on both "traditional" and "modern" elements, and played on the opposition between these two categories in a variety of ways. In popular music (examples of which will be discussed below), song styles had been classified into Japanese and foreign styles by the mid-1920s. The Japanese styles included *shin min'yō* or "new folk song," newly composed songs that resembled older folk songs in style but expressed a self-conscious "Japanese" spirit and longing for the *furusato*, the nostalgically remembered home village. Folk songs or *shin min'yō* referring to specific regions or villages often served in effect as advertisements for tourism and local products, and were promoted by local business people for that reason.¹⁷ The "escapist" modern city was evidently a place people wanted to escape from, and the "traditional" countryside could easily be marketed as a place to which one could escape, literally or imaginatively.

The opposition between modernity and tradition, then, was reinforced and exploited by those who saw a profit to be made from the sale of tradition. Modernity could be sold by means of the same opposition, with the values reversed. Women's magazines of the time promoted "conscientious consumerism" and rational planning for the "cultured life."¹⁸ This cultured life was opposed, implicitly at least, by an uncultured life, presumably the kind people had lived in the old days before modern consumer goods made conscientious consumerism possible.

Film was another area in which the traditional-modern opposition was used commercially. Popular film in Japan began by following conventions drawn from traditional theater forms: a narrator accompanied the films, women's roles were played by men, and many kabuki plays were made into films, known as *kyūgeki*, or "old drama". Old drama eventually developed into "period pieces" (*jidaigeki*, later known as *chanbara*), with dashing heroes and

¹⁵ Silverberg 1992, pp.46-7.

¹⁶ Ibid. pp.35-44.

¹⁷ Martin, p.347.

¹⁸ Smith, p.70.

plenty of swordplay. Meanwhile another category of film, known as "new school" (*shinpa*) developed in which modern settings were used, and kabuki conventions were deliberately avoided. During the 1920s there was a movement in both categories toward Western acting styles, subtitles rather than narrators, and actresses rather than female impersonators, but the contrast in setting between the modern world and a romanticized old Japan remained, and remained explicit in the terms used to classify films.¹⁹

A powerful symbol of modernity in the 1920s and 30s, and a focus of contention for differing interpretations of it, was the *moga*, the modern girl who wore stylish Western clothes and hairstyles and exercised unprecedented sexual and economic autonomy. Various versions of the *moga* appeared in movies and novels and were discussed in magazine articles. She was seen by both advocates and opponents as a symbol of the modern age and the changes that it had brought, in contrast to the Meiji woman, who had tended to be viewed more as the anchor of traditional stability in the midst of change. The *moga*'s Western look made clear to all that she was not a bastion of tradition, and her clothes and hairstyles provoked much heated discussion. But modern clothing and hairstyles were often seen mainly as signs of a departure from traditional sexual mores. Conservatives saw the *moga*'s assertive sexuality as a threat to the traditional marriage and to male vitality (novelist Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's character Naomi, in *Chijin no Ai*, is an example). The feminist journalist Kitamura Kaneko defended her, pointing out the sexual double standard by which she was being criticized. On the other hand, the Marxist feminist Yamakawa Kikue denounced the *moga* for her dissolute ways and absorption in sensual pleasures, saying these were the signs of a declining ruling class. Some rightists, undeterred by the parallels between their views and those of Marxists, saw the *moga* as part of a communist conspiracy to weaken the children of the privileged.²⁰ The *moga*, then, embodied the perceived changes in women's roles that constituted some of the most highly charged aspects of "modern life," and thus brought to a focus the contending views of modernity.

II. The Modern City in Popular Songs

Nowhere is the emergence of an idea of modernity, and of the contrasting idea of tradition, more apparent than in popular songs of the 1920s and 30s. The record industry in Japan had its beginnings in the late Meiji period, from which time traditional Japanese music genres such as *naniwabushi* and *gidayu* had been staples of the record business; Western classical music records had been imported and also sold well. At the same time, popular songwriters had begun to produce songs with a strong Western flavor. The first song to become a "hit record" in Japan was "Kachūsha no Uta," written by Nakayama Shinpei for use

¹⁹ McDonald, 98-101.

²⁰ Silverberg 1991, p. 248.

in a stage production of Tolstoy's novel *Resurrection*.²¹

It was in early Shōwa, however, that the record industry emerged as a major economic and cultural force. Three large international record companies (Columbia, Victor, and Polydor) established Japanese branches in 1927 and 1928, using the most modern electrical recording techniques. Record production exceeded 10 million units per year by 1929 and continued to rise, reaching a prewar peak of 30 million in 1937.²² During this period, imported records, visiting musicians, and Japanese musicians who had traveled abroad brought into Japan a wide range of Western popular music genres—jazz, Hawaiian music, tango, French chanson. These found enthusiastic audiences, especially among young urban Japanese. Many of these genres (jazz and tango in particular) were dance music, and they brought with them a boom in social dancing.

The idea of urban modernity in Japan was shaped by many things, but one of the most influential among them was a song. "Tokyo Kōshinkyoku" ("Tokyo March") composed by Nakayama Shinpei (whose "Kachūsha no Uta" was mentioned above) with lyrics by Saijō Yaso, was originally written as the theme song to a movie of the same name, which in turn was based on a serial novel appearing in a monthly magazine. It thus illustrates the close ties among the various new entertainment media: records, movies, and magazines. The song was released by Japan Victor in 1929 and became an enormous hit, selling 300,000 records. The lyrics are full of imagery such as the following, depicting the life of "modern" young people in Tokyo:

The willow trees on Ginza that I used to love

...

Dancing to jazz, passing the time with liquor,
When morning comes, the tears of the dancer

...

At rush hour, the rose that I picked,
At least, reminds me of her

...

You take the subway, I take the bus,
But the stops are not made for lovers

Shall we go to the cinema? Shall we have some tea?

Shall we escape on the Odakyū?²³

²¹ Nakamura, p.264.

²² Nihon Rekōdo Kyōkai, p.44.

²³ Original lyrics in Komota 1994, pp.260-1. My translation.

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The new transportation systems—the bus, the subway, and the Odakyū or Odawara Express, an express train line opened in 1927—are a major part of the urban world depicted here. But they are also a source of frustration: the stops are not made for lovers, and there is rush hour to deal with. As for the express train (which went from Tokyo to the quiet hill country nearby), it is a means of *escape* from the city and its frustrations. The pleasures of modern city life are here—the dancing, the liquor, the movies, the cafés where one can relax with a cup of tea—but the pleasures are mixed with tears and anxieties.

Saijō Yaso's original lyrics for this song also mentioned a "long-haired Marx boy," referring to the serious-looking young Marxist intellectuals who were a familiar sight in Tokyo at that time. Fearing government censorship, however, Japan Victor decided to cut this line from the lyrics.²⁴

Together with these evocations of Tokyo's very "modern" atmosphere, we also find a hint of nostalgia. The first line of the song is "The willow trees on Ginza that I used to love." Ginza had indeed once been lined with willow trees before the great earthquake, but not at the time this song was written. This reference to them suggests a nostalgia for all that had been lost in the earthquake, and more generally in Japan's modernization. In 1932 the city authorities, prompted by the success of "Tokyo Kōshinkyoku," once again had willow trees planted on Ginza.²⁵

Following on the earlier success of Nakayama Shinpei and others, Hattori Ryōichi emerged as the most popular and influential commercial song composer of the late 1930s. He is the composer of the inter-war period who was most attuned to the rhythms of jazz and other foreign genres, and it is his work that best expresses the vitality and excitement of Japanese modernity. "Ryūsengata Jazu" ("Streamlined Model Jazz," released by Japan Columbia in 1935; lyrics by Fujiwara Yamabiko), sings the praises of a fast-paced urban life, at an appropriately lively jazzy tempo:

The swallow of the street, the streamlined model
Treading the blue sky with a winged step
Comes flying as a portent of Spring
Comes flying in the blink of an eye
Speed speed high speed

Love wink, the streamlined model
Across a city block at rush hour
Goes and comes back again

²⁴ Saijō 1997: p.54.

²⁵ Kata 1985, p.10.

To the friend one is thinking of
Goes and comes back in the blink of an eye
Speed speed high speed

The muscles of the arm, the streamlined model
The speed of a swing-cut thrust out
Dashing, the boxer cuts the air
Cuts the air in the blink of an eye
Speed speed high speed²⁶

City life is connected to nature, love, and sports, through the images of the swallow, the love wink, and the boxer's punch; but the common link among these images is "speed, speed, high speed." The speed of automobiles and trains is not explicitly mentioned, but is implied by the very phrase "streamlined model," by the reference to rush hour, and perhaps by the syncopated, machine-like rhythmic figure that appears in the introduction and instrumental breaks. This implied celebration of technology might be compared to Italian Futurism, or to Russian Constructivism, whose ideas had been introduced into Japan in the 1920s by the artist and writer Murayama Tomoyoshi.²⁷

The high density of loan words from English ("speed," "rush hour," "swing cut," etc.) and French ("Amie") in this song suggest that they might be intended as signs of Western-derived sophistication, as the reference to boxing might also be. On the other hand, words and other symbols originally adopted from the West do not necessarily retain a referential connection to the West. It is similarly difficult to say to what extent the uptempo jazz arrangement was meant to refer to American jazz and American modernity, as opposed to simply modernity.

"Ryūsengata Jazu," sung by a male vocalist and glorifying high speed and boxing, creates a set of emotional associations that seem to be directed mainly at the young urban male. "Oshare Musume" ("Elegant Girl," released by Japan Columbia in 1936; music by Hattori and lyrics by Kubota Shōji), is another uptempo jazz piece; but this time the singer is female (the soon-to-be-famous Awaya Noriko), and the bright tempo helps to create an image of the bright and cheery urban female:

Elegant girl
Always cheerful, a charming girl
On the Ginza in springtime, cocking her head, a charming girl

²⁶ Original lyrics in Hattori 1989. My translation.

²⁷ Silverberg 1992, p.33.

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Red lips, black pupils
Cherishing dreams and hopes in her heart
An elegant girl who smiles sweetly, singing to herself

Elegant girl, always lively
Elegant girl, always cheerful
Elegant girl, always charming

Elegant girl
On the Ginza in the evening, her shoes clicking
A cheerful girl
Wearing a fragrant red rose on her breast
While she waits for her sweetheart
Sweetly singing a love ditty
Sweetly smiling²⁸

"Oshare," which I have translated here as "elegant," might also be translated as "spiffy," "dressed-up," or "stylish." The Elegant Girl's external appearance and manner are the main concern of the song: red lips, red rose, shoes clicking, always cheerful, always well-dressed. The dreams and hopes in her heart and the love ditty that she sings as she waits for her boyfriend give us glimpses of her inner feelings, but seem mainly to add a touch of emotional weight to the external description. She is positioned in a particular place—Ginza—where, we might note, she is poised to go shopping for the clicking shoes, lipstick, and other accessories that keep her looking elegant. One is tempted to wonder whether the Mitsukoshi Department Store might have commissioned this song. But the link is probably less direct: young women who shop on the Ginza were probably a large and growing segment of the record-buying public; the songwriters produced a song that codifies a positive image of these women and associates that image with pleasant emotions and with a lively, catchy tune.

Modern urban consumption is again romanticized in "Ippai no Kōhī Kara" ("After a Cup of Coffee," released by Japan Columbia in 1939; music by Hattori, lyrics by Fujiura Hiroshi). This time the commodity to be consumed is coffee, and a coffee shop is the setting in which a young couple shares happiness and dreams:

After a cup of coffee
There are times when the flowers of dreams blossom
In the twilight, on a city terrace

²⁸ Original lyrics in Hattori 1989. My translation.

The lights of our two hearts touched

After a cup of coffee

Mocha Princess, Java Girl

Let's sing a song, a serenade of the south

The two of us, shoulder to shoulder, cheerfully

After a cup of coffee

Dreams are faintly fragrant

The curtain on that window

A red arabesque pattern

Sways to and fro

After a cup of coffee

Little birds twitter, Spring comes

This evening, a bitter-sweetness for the two of us

Shall I give you two lumps of sugar?

Before the moon comes out

Before it gets cold²⁹

A male and a female vocalist alternate verses, working coffee into the fabric of their happiness: after coffee, dreams blossom, birds twitter, Spring comes. There is a notable difference in gender roles: the woman describes the scene—the city terrace, the red-patterned curtain—and sings about the blossoming of dreams and the touching of hearts, while the man addresses his partner directly, suggesting that they sing a song and offering her two lumps of sugar. For the man, coffee becomes part of the very identity of his beloved: she is a Mocha Princess. Again, this song could be seen almost as an advertisement for coffee shops; certainly, it is an effort to take advantage of a perceived market consisting of young people who frequent coffee shops, by constructing coffee as a symbol of young love and happiness. The musical arrangement is lively and jazz-influenced, although more relaxed than the previous two. The instrumentation includes an accordion and a Hawaiian steel guitar, a combination unlikely to be heard anywhere else in the world at that time. Here as elsewhere, Hattori shows great originality in creating his own sound by bringing together a variety of “modern” musical elements.

These three songs, all composed by Hattori but written by different lyricists, all celebrate liveliness and love in a context of urban consumption. It is notable that all three are

²⁹ Original lyrics in Hattori 1989. My translation.

explicitly set in springtime, which reinforces the mood of youth and vitality. This use of seasonal references might be traced historically to conventions in traditional Japanese songs and poetry. But it might be misleading to label this a "Japanese" element, in contrast to "Western" elements in these songs; the historical origin of one element or another (even where this can be determined) does not necessarily correspond to its meaning in the context of a modern culture that was actively being constructed out of material from a variety of sources.³⁰

III. Geisha Singers and "Tradition" in Popular Songs

Flourishing partly through contrast to the modern trend represented by jazz-influenced songs such as those discussed above were genres that represented Japanese tradition and nostalgia for the Edo period. One of these genres was the *shin min'yō* mentioned earlier. Another, which occasionally overlapped with *shin min'yō* but had rather different implications, was the music of geisha singers, who were often called *uguisu geisha* (nightingale geisha).

From around 1910, the geisha world had begun to be criticized as an old-fashioned and morally questionable social institution. The music of geisha, however, continued to be seen as quiet, tasteful, and refined, a standard of traditional urban elegance. Many geisha therefore began seeking other lines of work, and some became music teachers or performers. Geisha had traditionally performed their shamisen-accompanied vocal music only in private for their customers, but during the 1920s a new style, *shibai kouta*, was developed expressly for performance on stage. Taking advantage of this trend and of the wave of Edo-period nostalgia that followed the earthquake, record companies created a genre of traditional-flavored songs recorded by geisha singers.³¹ The distinctive appeal of these singers was above all their traditional vocal style—a thin, delicate voice production and ornamentation. Their recordings often include Western as well as traditional Japanese musical elements, but always feature this characteristic vocal style, which served as a clear signifier of Edo-period urban culture.

The first and one of the most popular songs in this genre was "Gion Kouta," released by Japan Victor in January 1930. This was only about seven months after "Tokyo Kōshinkyoku" had been released by the same company. Also like "Tokyo Kōshinkyoku," this song was the theme song to a movie, which in turn was based on a novel (by Nagata Mikihiko, who also wrote the song lyrics). The music was composed by Sasa Kōka, who had also composed a more "modern" hit song a few years earlier ("Kimi Koishi"); record companies and individual composers were clearly working both sides of the modern-traditional contrast. The singer

³⁰ Silverberg 1992: 31,49.

³¹ Kurata 1982, p. 894.

was a geisha named Fumikichi (later known as Fujimoto Fumikichi). The lyrics are full of references to places and events in Kyôto, and aim to create a sense of place and atmosphere. But it is the musical sounds and structures that convey this atmosphere most strongly.

Unlike the lengthy performances of other traditional genres such *gidayu* and *nagauta*, the kouta of geisha singers were usually three to four minutes or less in length, making them ideal for recording on one side of an SP record. "Gion Kouta," however, was a relatively long piece, and was recorded as two verses on each side of a record. Instrumental interludes were inserted between verses, making a structure similar to the traditional *tegotomono*. The melodic counterpoint of these interludes suggests Western influence, but is also strongly reminiscent of traditional koto and shamisen music. The instrumentation includes shamisen and taiko, as well as Western instruments such as bass and violin. Fumikichi's thin, somewhat nasal vocal sound is characteristic of many geisha singers. Of all the hit records of early Shôwa, this song is perhaps the closest to traditional Japanese music.

Following "Gion Kouta," the next hit by a geisha singer was "Shima no Musume" (Island Girl), recorded by the geisha Katsutarô for Japan Victor and released in December 1932. Katsutarô, from Niigata on the Japan Sea coast, had begun recording for Victor in 1931. Sales of "Shima no Musume" skyrocketed after the song was played in radio broadcasts, reaching 350,000 units, according to Victor statistics.³² The song was soon being performed on stage, and a movie was made based on it. The song begins with a melisma on the syllable "ha," a device taken up in a number of later songs, forming a sub-genre that came to be known as "ha-kouta." An article about Katsutarô appeared in the popular monthly magazine *Shufu no Tomo* (The Housewife's Friend), and she herself began to perform all over the country. She thus became one early example of the "star" phenomenon that had been introduced into Japan through the new media of records, movies, radio, and magazines. In 1933 she quit her geisha career to be a full-time singer, and changed her name to Kouta Katsutarô.

Unlike "Gion Kouta," no Japanese traditional instruments are used in "Shima no Musume." Guitar and flute provide the main accompaniment. The flute provides a melancholy atmosphere reminiscent of the shakuhachi, but the characteristic pitch-bends and breathy tone color of the shakuhachi are absent. The instrumental sound of the song, then, is much more Western than that of "Gion Kouta." But in contrast to Fumikichi's relatively simple vocal style, Katsutarô's singing is full of subtle ornaments and flourishes that are sharply different from the approach of Western-style singers. The instrumental accompaniment is also sparser than in the earlier song, so that the singer's ornamented vocal style is featured prominently. It seems likely that Katsutarô's lovely singing, above all, was responsible for the success of this record.

³² Kurata 1992: 168-9.

This singing style itself, however, became a topic of controversy. Before her rise to stardom, Katsutarō had made a recording of "Sado Okesa," a folk song from Sado island near her hometown of Niigata. In July 1933, members of the Niigata Okesa Kai, a folk song preservation society, heard her version on the radio; they immediately protested to the radio station in Tokyo that her singing style was incorrect and amounted to a desecration of their local culture. (Katsutarō solved the problem simply by renaming her version "Katsutarō Okesa.")³³ The vocal style of geishas singing folk songs on radio broadcasts had, in fact, been criticized by folk song enthusiasts a number of times even before this incident. Conflicts such as this show how tensions and cultural differences between the city and the country that had existed since the Edo period were brought into the open by the appearance of national media such as radio. Urban geisha had been singing rural folk songs in their own style for centuries. But only in the twentieth century were these songs broadcast nationwide, and only in the twentieth century did folk song preservation societies appear, whose members could hear those broadcasts and protest against them as a corruption of "tradition."

Thus geisha singers and their style of singing represented not simply "tradition" as opposed to "modernity," but rather a particular kind of traditional urban sophistication associated especially with the Edo period cities. This, in turn, evoked different responses from different listeners. For most city dwellers, geisha singers evoked the urban refinement of Edo period culture, either as an object of nostalgia or as something to be integrated into the modern city; for devotees of rural folk songs, they represented an urban (although not strictly modern) corruption of folk culture.

IV. From Modern Life to Militarism

Modern media technology, then, made possible the production of a popular culture in which both ideas of modernity and ideas of tradition (indeed, conflicting ideas of tradition) were able to grow and flourish. These ideas prospered, furthermore, through their contrasts and oppositions with each other. The conflicts between folk music traditionalists and geisha singers gave devotees of both the opportunity to take sides and to confirm their identities. Japanese popular songs of the time both reflected and helped to reinforce the general sense of a contrast between modernity and tradition. Record companies probably benefited from that contrast, as it enabled them to sell songs that celebrated the emerging modern world, as well as those that evoked a longing for disappearing traditional worlds.

Not everyone in Japan, certainly, was drawing sharp distinctions between the traditional and the modern, or the Japanese and the Western. Kawabata Yasunari, in his novel *Asakusa Kurenidan* (The Asakusa Crimson Gang) wrote of the emergence of a new street culture and jargon in which people combined foreign and Japanese elements without drawing any

³³ Kurata 1992: 169.

such clear boundaries. Gonda Yasunosuke interviewed children who could reel off the names of dozens of movie stars, Japanese and foreign together without distinction.³⁴ The perceived "foreignness" of things foreign was clearly not a fixed attribute, but must have varied for different people and over time.

The dichotomy between traditional and modern may, in fact, have been emphasized in many cultural products precisely because of the increasingly blurred boundary in people's daily lives between the "traditional" and the "modern" (both of which were here, in the present), or the "foreign" and the "Japanese" (both of which were here, in Japan). The disorientation of rapid change and the assimilation of foreign influences may have left many people feeling the need for a simple set of categories with which to make sense of it all. This need was expressed in various forms by writers, and exploited by nationalists and by marketers of consumer goods.

The traditional-modern dichotomy was also partly associated with the growing tension between the two competing hegemonies of militarism and capitalism. Many young, intensely nationalistic army officers came from rural areas, and generally the military identified with rural Japan and the "traditional" values it represented, opposing the corruption of these values that modernity represented. Their anger was directed in particular toward the *zaibatsu*, the huge business conglomerates, and the party governments of the 1920s and 30s, who had close connections to the *zaibatsu*. Big business, on the other hand, had an economic interest in "modern life," in that it profited from the production and importation of the consumer goods and cultural products that made modern life possible.

The governing parties had to balance their ties to business with the increasing demands of the military. In general the government tended to align itself with the traditionalists by controlling popular culture in the interest of safeguarding "manners and morals." This was partly, perhaps, because direct control over popular culture was mostly exercised by career bureaucrats, who Kasza argues saw themselves as a "moral elite" and tended to act independently of the elected government, interpreting laws rather loosely to suit their purposes.³⁵ But the party governments also took a very dim view of certain "modern" influences, in particular Marxism, which was the target of ongoing repression and censorship (even though it never became a major political force, except among intellectuals).

As the military gained influence during the 1930s, censorship and other controls over culture increased. In 1937, as full-scale war with China began, the traditionalist ideas of the military were firmly ensconced as national policy. In *Kokutai no Hongi* (Cardinal Principles of the National Polity) the government declared that the original spirit of the Japanese people was a spirit of purity and filial piety; they had strayed away from these virtues, but

³⁴ Silverberg 1992, p.49.

³⁵ Kasza, pp.70-71.

could recover them through selfless devotion to the war.³⁶ In the late 1930s, the government, seeking to put an end to "modern life," launched a "spiritual mobilization" campaign and declared that "extravagance is the enemy." The effort achieved some success during the Pacific War; although the Japanese people were probably never as spiritually mobilized as the authorities wished, wartime restrictions and shortages did indeed eliminate most modern pleasures from daily life. But this was only a brief lull in a long-term cultural transformation. With the end of the war, the U.S. occupation brought a new and larger wave of Western influences into Japan, and modern life, with all its joys and anxieties, sprang to life again stronger than ever.

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³⁶ Dower, p.225.

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